

“Following Jesus or Following Rules”
Colossians 2:16-23
October 23, 2016

INTRODUCTION:

Today’s passage contains more information about the error Paul is countering than any other part of his letter. While it doesn’t give us enough information to identify the false teaching with any precision, we do learn that one of its principal features was a focus on rule-keeping. I considered titling this sermon “No Rules, Just Jesus,” but thought that title misleading because Paul does not intend here to condemn all rule-keeping. After all, he gives some of his own rules later in the letter. Rules are essential and helpful in many situations. It is impossible to have a stable, healthy family without some rules. Our church has rules about many things. For example, we have a child protection policy that doesn’t allow an adult to be alone with our children at any time. We have rules about handling money that protects both our money and those who handle it. Rules are necessary and good in many situations.

Paul is addressing the situation in which rules replace Jesus. That’s why he has been talking about Jesus throughout this letter. If we are looking to Jesus for life and joy, we will not be tempted to look to rule-keeping for that. One of Aesop’s fables is about a hound dog that found a bone and held it tightly in his mouth. As he was heading into the woods to bury his prize, he came to a stream with a footbridge across it. As he was crossing, he happened to look into the water and saw his reflection. Thinking it was another dog with a bigger bone, he growled in a menacing way, hoping to frighten the dog into dropping his bigger bone. The other dog only growled back at him, but didn’t drop his bone. In desperation, he lunged at the other dog and snapped at the bone in the other dog’s mouth, seeking to grab it from him. In doing so, he lost his own bone in the water and came up only with a mouth of water. That’s what we do when we replace Jesus with rule-keeping. We lose Jesus and we find that the rules we looked to in order to bring life to us have only brought bondage, guilt and hatred. So it is not surprising that Paul has such strong words to write about the evils of such rule-keeping, concluding with his statement that it is worldly and even satanic. So let’s look further at the problems of the kind of rule-keeping that replaces Jesus.

I. Rule-Keeping Is Guilt-Producing

Paul warns the Colossians not to let anyone **“pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink, or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath”** (v. 16). Most of these laws are found among the ceremonial laws of the Old Testament. It is typical to divide the laws of the Old Testament into the

categories of moral, ceremonial and civil. The moral laws are those summarized by the Ten Commandments and are intended to regulate the lives of God's people of all eras. The ceremonial laws are concerned with the worship of Israel, including the sacrificial and purity laws. The civil law concerns Israel's existence as a nation, a civil entity. The ceremonial and civil laws have been fulfilled in Christ, but the moral law is still binding upon God's people. Apparently, these false teachers were seeking to establish parts of the ceremonial law as still binding. They urged compliance with the dietary laws of the Old Testament, as well as keeping of certain of the feasts. The three words "festival," "new moon," and "Sabbath" summarize the annual, monthly and weekly observance of days required in the Old Testament.

The wording of Paul's warning is significant. He tells them not to let anyone pass judgment on them, or condemn them. He doesn't say, "Tell them not to worry about keeping these rules." This is the doctrine of Christian liberty. Paul doesn't want the rule keepers to be able to force others to keep their rules. Nor does he want those who don't observe these things to force the rule-keepers not to observe those things they want to observe. Whether they keep a rule or not is not the issue. Rather, it is maintaining their focus on Jesus. The gospel of Jesus brings us freedom. Someone asked me recently if our church permitted people to raise their hands in worship at AVPC's public worship services. I answered that since the gospel gives us the freedom to do so, how can we deny someone the freedom to raise their hands. I also said that the gospel gives us the freedom not to raise our hands in worship. The truth is that some find it more worshipful to raise their hands in worship and some find it more worshipful to be quiet and non-demonstrative.

So how is it exactly that we are to heed Paul's warning that we "**let no one pass judgment**" on us? It doesn't mean that we put them in a chokehold until they say, "I give up; I won't judge you regarding this." Rather, it means that we are not to take upon ourselves any guilt in an area where God gives us liberty. In my experience, there are many Christians who live with constant low-level guilt in areas where there ought to be Christian liberty. The rules by which they feel themselves condemned are more cultural than biblical. For example, people feel guilty for not putting enough money in their retirement account, for not reading enough to their children, for being twenty pounds overweight, for not exercising, for not saving enough money for their children's college education, etc. Paul warns us not to let ourselves feel guilty and condemned by these things.

How is it that we can keep from feeling guilty about such matters? Verse 17 tells us. "**These are a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ.**" These ceremonial laws were intended to be a picture of Jesus. But after Jesus has come there is no more use for the picture. It would be like preferring the picture of your wife to the presence of your wife. To say it colloquially, Jesus is the real deal. Rule-keeping cannot bring you what Jesus

can. Even in the best case, when the rules are part of the Bible, they cannot do for you what Jesus can do. He can bring freedom, joy and forgiveness.

Let me apply this in one more way before moving on. The Christian liberty we have in the gospel means that it is okay to have fun. Are you able to give yourself permission to have fun? I believe we obey this commandment by doing so. It is a wonderful gift of the freedom we have in Christ to have fun and to give thanks to the Lord for the fun. In doing so, we are able to avoid the pitfalls of making an idol out of having fun, or becoming proud of it or addicted to it. The gospel gives us freedom. Don't let anyone take it away from you.

II. Rule-Keeping Is Divisive

Paul's second warning addresses a situation that takes things a step further than the previous warning. Instead of feeling condemned by replacing Jesus with rule-keeping, the danger now is that one would feel disqualified. The guilt rises to the level that a person concludes they can never meet the minimum standard. Three rules are mentioned that led to this feeling of being disqualified. The first one is asceticism, a word that was often used of fasting. The New Testament is somewhat spare in its directions about fasting. Jesus warned of the dangers associated with it. He and his disciples were criticized for not fasting. The only fasting mentioned by Paul was involuntary. It is mentioned a couple of times in Acts that the church engaged in times of fasting and prayer, but I can find no place where fasting is required. But these false teachers in Colossae seemed to have been so strong in requiring it that they caused some to conclude that they were disqualified.

The other rules mentioned had something to do with the worship of angels and the seeing of visions. We're not quite sure what Paul means by the worship of angels. It could be the worship given to angels or worshiping like the angels. In any case, its effect was to make people feel cut off and excluded by the fact that their experiences didn't seem to be on a par with those of these false teachers. They also talked a great deal about visions, with similar effects of making people feel excluded and disqualified.

Paul tells us that what is really going on with these false teachers isn't what people might at first think is going on. Imagine that there is a group of people who start attending our church, and who spend an entire day in prayer and fasting every week. While doing so, they report how they experience such sublime experiences of worship that it is like they are in heaven worshipping with the angels of heaven. Some even talk about seeing visions of the glory of heaven, which they speak about at great length. It would be tempting to think of this new group as super-spiritual people. Paul says that it is just the opposite. The truth is that they are **“puffed up without reason by [a] sensuous mind”** (v. 18). These people are full of pride.

Paul goes on to say that they are **“not holding fast to the Head.”** He is talking about Jesus. The effect of this false teaching is to make people feel disqualified. But when we hold fast to Jesus, we are assured that we are qualified by God Himself. Paul already mentioned that in the previous chapter. He says that he gives thanks to the Father, **“who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints”** (1:12). The way we “Let no one disqualify” us is by holding fast to the Head and believing what he says, that we are qualified.

It is as we do so that we are knit together and grow. In other words, these rules required of the false teachers have served to divide God’s people into the “haves” and “have-nots.” Holding fast to Jesus brings unity and growth.

III. Rule-Keeping Is Powerless

In this final paragraph of the chapter, Paul once again mentions some rules championed by the false teachers. **“Do not handle, Do not taste, Do not touch”** (v. 21). He then categorizes these rules as **“asceticism and severity to the body”** (v. 23). While acknowledging that such rules can have an appearance of wisdom, Paul condemns such things about as strongly as possible. He says first that such rules are at odds with our dying to the elemental spirits through our union with Jesus in his death. The phrase “elemental spirits” is one of Paul’s ways of talking about the demonic. This asceticism and its rules may have an appearance of wisdom, but their origin is not with God. Rather, they come from Satan and his forces. He goes on to say that it is worldly and it is a man-made religion.

I like the way Dick Lucas summarizes this.

Of course the world cannot do without religion. But since it rejects the truth of Christ it must find its religion elsewhere. The *elemental spirits of the universe* are glad to oblige: their leader considers himself the prince of this world, and therefore is happy to provide a religion that can seem to satisfy people while keeping them from God (2 Cor. 11:12-15)... Since the distinctive mark of the truth of his hated enemy Christ is *‘grace’* (1:6)... so his religion is one of law, regulations, and works (verse 21).”

Then he concludes his criticism of this teaching by saying that it is powerless to address the sin of our hearts. These rules **“are of no value in stopping the indulgence of the flesh”** (v. 23). When it comes to true holiness, they bring nothing of value. Someone has defined asceticism as “feeding the flesh [our sinful nature] by starving it.” There was a nationally known Christian speaker back in the 70’s and 80’s who became well-known for his weeklong seminars. One of the practices he recommended was a one day a week fast,

which he was quick to mention was his common practice. It would seem, though, that this practice was insufficient to control this man's sinful nature. Sadly, thirty-four female employees of his ministry claimed sexual harassment by him, and four of them said that he had molested them. After an independent investigation, his board asked for his resignation.

It is clear from this last verse that Paul is not negative toward rules because he believes that God's grace toward us in Jesus gives us a license to sin. He is negative toward these rules because he knows that instead of leading us out of sin, they lead us into greater sin. It is because Paul is concerned with righteous moral behavior that he takes us to Jesus, to his grace and to the cross. Did you notice how in every section of this text Paul takes us to Jesus? In the section about letting no one make you feel guilty, he says that Jesus is the substance, not the shadow. In the section containing the warning about letting no one disqualify you, he tells us to hold fast to the Head. And in this final section, he reminds us that we have died with Christ.

Do you want to be more holy? I hope you do. The path to holiness passes through the cross of Christ. It happens through a lifestyle of repentance and faith, not through adding rules. When we walk humbly with Jesus, looking to him and trusting him, we begin to see everything in life differently. We even begin to see God's rules differently. God does have rules for us. It is critical, though, that we read his rules correctly. Because of Jesus, we are to read them as promises. Every command in the Bible is a gracious promise from God. We know that because the Bible says that God will write his law upon our heart. So when God says, "Don't be anxious," read it as a promise. God is writing that on your heart. By his grace, it is certain that one day you won't be anxious. The same is true for his command "Do not fear," as well as his command to love God and neighbor. As a matter of fact, every command of the Bible is a promise of what God by his grace is doing and will complete in you one day.

CONCLUSION:

I want to close with what you might consider to be an unusual application. The application is to go out and have some fun this week. You have freedom in Christ, and as a result of this freedom you can enjoy God's gifts with a clear conscience. Just remember to give thanks to him. It is only because of Jesus that Paul can say "Let no one condemn you," because Jesus has forgiven you. It is because of Jesus that Paul can say "Let no one disqualify you," because Jesus has qualified you to share in his inheritance. You have everything in Christ, so just enjoy life and give thanks to God. What you will find when you do so is a heart that grows more in love with God every day.